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ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates several examples of visual science fiction use in teaching literary classics, and is based on the philosophy that students share a visual cultural literacy through movies and television, types of representation with which they are more familiar than with literary texts. It claims that visual science fiction can be utilized in classes to teach undergraduates how to read literary classics, especially at allegorical and moral levels, and that science fiction depictions can also be used as modern retellings of specific literary classics. Examples of visual science fiction uses cited include "Star Wars," which works well due to its status as a cultural phenomenon, and analogies drawn between various "Star Trek: The Next Generation" episodes or parodies and classics such as "Don Quixote," "The Epic of Gilgamesh," and Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Rappaccini's Daughter." (EF)

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Using Science Fiction to Teach Mainstream Literature

What I teach is the canon--from the Bible to Shakespeare, from *Don Quijote* to Woolf, from Dante to Austen. I teach quite a few sophomore survey courses both for English and non-English majors, and one major problem is that students have what E. D. Hirsch, Jr. terms "a lack of cultural literary"--or do they? I went to the ALSC (Association of Literary Scholars and Critics), if I may mention that organization at an annual gathering of the Modern Language Association without lightening striking. And during a discussion of *Don Quijote*, someone claimed that Cervantes had succeeded in obliterating chivalric romance. Several of us simultaneously mentioned, "What about Star Wars?!" And this recognition is the focus of my talk. Science fiction, especially *Star Wars* because of its popularity and successful marketing, is the continuation of earlier genres and thus can be used as a reference point for lost, puzzled, bemused, and even bored students. In other words, students do share a cultural literacy, one, not from books, but from movies and television. Furthermore, visual science fiction such as movies and television episodes can be utilized in class to teach undergraduates how to read literature, especially the allegorical and moral levels of reading. I also use science fiction movies and television episodes as modern retellings of specific literary classics, such as Hawthorne's short story "Rappaccini's Daughter[1]," the one example which I will discuss in detail.

Students today seem more comfortable with visual representations than with literary texts.

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Students seem to read very little, and re-read less. And science fiction provides a common reference point for explaining literary concepts, even simple ones such as re-reading. For example, students in my Great Books course sometimes have difficulty understanding the point of Swift's satire in his "A Letter from Capt. Gulliver to his Cousin Sympson" for the second edition of *Gulliver's Travels*. But they do understand the different experiences between watching *Star Wars* for the first time and then watching the movie again after watching *The Empire Strikes Back* and knowing that Darth Vador is the father of Luke Skywalker. I also use this movie to clarify foreshadowing: in the scene where Yoda trains Luke as a Jedi Knight, Luke ignores Yoda's warning and enters a tree where he fights a figure that he, and the audience, believes is Darth Vador only to see the figure's mask crack open to reveal his own face. I use this same scene as a visual aid in teaching Spenser's *Faerie Queene* in my English Literature I survey course. Students have considerable difficulty with the basic plot of this allegorical epic much less the complex political and religious allegory. Correlating scenes from the poem with scenes from *Star Wars* helps the students visualize the poem, the first step in understanding the allegory. For example, students overlook the psychological developments early in Book 1, Canto 1 when the hero enters the Den of Errour (stanzas 11-14). Here the knight rashly enters the cave despite Lady Una's warning, and it is his impetuousness that most endangers him, at this point and also later on. The youthful energy and courage of each knight, Spenser's literary one and the science fiction Jedi, will serve each man well, but only after he learns how to temper his rashness.

Explaining *Don Quijote* as a parody of chivalric romances is easy, but having the students watch *Galaxy Quest*, the 1999 parody of the Star Trek television series and of the culture of scifi conventions, greatly helps them not only understand parody, and that a good parody is a well-

developed story in its own right, but also what is lost when the reader, or audience, is not the audience the writer intends. To explain chivalric romance, *Star Wars* is infinitely better than a lecture, and it also serves as a modern morality play, Luke Skywalker as Everyman, although the television series *Star Trek* or *Babylon 5* work even better. Patrick Stewart, at the beginning of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*'s lengthy run, explicitly compared this series with the medieval morality plays such as *Mankind*.

Although some students in each class are fans of Star Trek and other science fiction movies and series, *Star Wars*, any of the movies, works best as a reference point, not so much because it is the best example of science fiction, but because of its existence as a cultural phenomenon. Its popularity marks it as the descendent of "popular" entertainment, such as *Hamlet*, or John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, or Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. However, the form--film--is considerably different and the difference leads to the next part of this paper. Although students cultural literacy is intact, if different from many professors, theirs is a visual cultural literacy. Students simply don't seem to read much, and most do not know how to read. Students are remarkably unprepared to discuss metaphor, allegory, imagery, motifs--all the hidden levels of meaning, the depths within the literary classics. Students are, however, able to recognize such concepts in a film. For example, I explain the narratological concept of focalizer by using an episode of either *X-Files* or *Star Trek: The Next Generation* that replays the same event through the viewpoints of different characters. And I miss terribly the short-lived series *Brimstone* for explaining Christian doctrines such as redemption, hell, and Satan when discussing Dante's *Inferno*.

Getting students to read beyond the plot and characters is a challenge. I usually show the

Star Trek: The Next Generation episode "Darmok" the first day of sophomore survey courses. This episode is a re-telling of the Indian *Epic of Gilgamesh* that includes an oral performance of a small part of the epic. The story opens with the crew of the Enterprise meeting a race of beings, the Tamarians, a race whose entire language structure is metaphorical; in order to understand any Tamarian word, one must understand the references behind the word--the cultural significances behind the smallest signifier. Most of my students are somewhat familiar with Star Trek but very few have seen this episode, so they are in the same position to a certain extent as the Enterprise crew. Both the crew and the students face a situation filled with ambiguity and confusion, not unlike what the students feel reading *Beowulf* or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* or *The Faerie Queene*. But watching a television episode is a very familiar activity for students; television's visual cues instantly interpret the verbal signifiers. Students even recall character names more readily from film than from reading.

This episode, "Darmok," is not only a re-telling of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, but it also teaches students how to interpret *Gilgamesh* and other literary texts. The plot revolves around the attempt by the Tamarian captain to communicate with Captain Picard, the captain of the Enterprise. To do so, the alien draws on a myth of his people which is similar in part to the basic outline of *Gilgamesh*: two completely different men fight a common enemy instead of each other and become allies, "the best of companions." Both stories also share the death of one of the protagonists, in each case "the wild man" or "the other." In order to understand the aliens' language, Captain Picard must become part of their story, a feat, he acknowledges, requiring "patience and understanding." In order to understand the world of Star Trek, the students must, and readily do, become immersed in this other world of reality. This episode recreates students'

experiences of "encountering" a literary text and frequently that culture for the first time--*Gilgamesh*, the Bible, Homer's *Odyssey*, Dante's *Commedia*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. In my experience students quickly "read" the layers of Star Trek, mostly because of its visual nature--casting, costumes, body language. Those students who haven't the foggiest idea of what a Klingon is, immediately grasp that race's warlike, aggressive stance, that Worf is responsible for ship's security, and that he will interpret most people and events as a potential threat. His paradigm is readily understood in virtually ten seconds and four or five lines of dialogue, body language and facial expressions providing additional information. Little imagination and less patience are required to understand Worf, but the process of decoding has begun--both for the students and soon for the captain and crew of the Enterprise. It's interesting that it is the aliens--the other--the Tamarian captain who immediately understands the lack of cultural comprehension, the inability to grasp his people's narrative imagery, that prevents the crew of the Enterprise understanding the Tamarian language; the Tamarian captain takes the necessary steps to teach them how to read metaphor. In a way, I suppose that we in the teaching profession are the Tamarians, the other.

This episode also dramatizes the dangers of faulty interpretations, an important lesson in today's academia where students are frequently assured that any interpretation is possible and all interpretations are equally valid. There are 47 different Darmoks according to the Enterprise's computer, from a deity to a frozen dessert, but only one makes sense in this situation, in this "reading." Counselor Troy, the Enterprise crew member who attempts to figure out the Tamarian's language, acknowledges that technology doesn't really help. The computer provides the necessary information, but humans must synthesize the information provided in order to find

the correct connections. Although the incorrect connections, the wrong reading or interpretation, will probably not get the student killed, it will lead to further confusion and possibly lower grades. Both failure and irony are dramatically portrayed when the Enterprise crew "succeeds" in rescuing Captain Picard just when he succeeds in understanding the metaphorical codes in the Tamarian language so that he then fails to save the Tamarian captain's life.

The crew finally understands the complexity and difficulty of the Tamarian narrative imagery, as do the watching students. Counselor Troy uses the example of "Juliet in her balcony" as an example of human narrative imagery. In order to understand that this reference means "romance," one must know something about Juliet, not necessarily to have read Shakespeare's play, but to know who Juliet is and what she is doing on the balcony. And the more one knows of Juliet's narrative, the more contexts brought to the story, the more meanings brought from the narrative. As Captain Picard notes at the end of "Darmok," as he reads the Homeric hymns in the original Greek from a leather-bound book, we must know our own literary past to understand both our future and the future of others. Re-readings lead to new readings--some valid, some not. Eventually new stories, still using the "root metaphors" of the old stories, stories such as Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter," are retold in a new form, in this case *Star Trek: The Next Generation*'s "Unnatural Selection."

In his story "Rappaccini's Daughter" Nathaniel Hawthorne asks whether improvement of the human condition is desirable. Both "Rappaccini's Daughter" and "Unnatural Selection" demonstrate that while the attempt to improve the human condition may be an admirable goal, it is not without dangerous, even lethal, consequences. Rappaccini's proposed destruction of disease would also result in the death of most, if not all, humans. In other words, his experiment

is an artificially accelerated adaptation of natural selection--the elimination of inferior members to create a better adapted and, thus, a more successful species. An almost identical situation with even greater lethal consequences occurs in "Unnatural Selection."

There are numerous parallels between Hawthorne's original short story set in Renaissance Italy and the Star Trek television version set on the 24th-century U.S.S. Enterprise and the Darwin Genetic Research Station. Both Rappaccini's garden and the Darwin research station are isolated arenas for human genetics experimentation of monumental proportions and devastating side effects. Both stories contain medical researchers who are dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, to the point of obsession. Both stories involve parents who want the best for their children, but who refuse either to consider or to acknowledge the cost. Both stories explode the myth of scientists as beings of perfect objectivity, without passion or bias. And both stories question the paradigm of whether improvement of the human condition through medical intervention is entirely possible, or even desirable.

The *Star Trek* story's main protagonist is a medical scientist, Doctor Kate Pulaski; the on-going experiment of which she becomes a part involves "genetically created" humans, what she calls "the future of humanity." Again the goal of the experiment is a worthy one: the medical researchers at the Darwin Genetic Research Station have given their children, among other genetic improvements, an aggressive immune system so that they will be immune to all diseases. This experiment, like Rappaccini's, is one of artificially accelerated natural selection, although these doctors, unlike Rappaccini, do not realize the lethal consequence of their experimentation. Their sin is one of lack of imagination or foresight, not deliberate malice, but the result is the same. The children's aggressive immune systems actually attack any organism that could cause

harm regardless of what, or who, that organism is; Beatrice in her garden "kills" whatever wanders in, an insect, a lizard, the flowers that Giovanni tosses to her. When the children are inadvertently exposed to a virus, their immune systems react, protecting the children, but also attacking the DNA of the virus and its human hosts. The result is the death by accelerated aging of a supply ship's 26 crew members and the near death of Pulaski and the children's parents. Although they survive, children and parents may be divided for the rest of their lives, with the genetically-enhanced offspring condemned to spend their entire lives in the isolation lab. In comparison Beatrice's suicide hardly seems a more unpleasant fate.

Like the Darwin researchers, Rappaccini plans an accelerated adaptation of natural selection, the elimination of inferior members of a species by the superior members to create a better adapted, thus a more successful species. Rappaccini does not wish his experiment to supersede God's creation; rather he is improving upon God's handiwork by restoring man to his former pristine state before the fall. Beatrice and Giovanni are truly the new Adam and Eve who have escaped one of the consequences--death by disease--of Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden (Inge 201). Similarly, the children on the Darwin Genetic Research Station, a modern technological Eden, are the next step in human evolution, a step foreshadowed with the episode's title, a metaphorical reference students are more familiar with and more comfortable with than the metaphor of the garden. The station's director and chief researcher, Dr. Sara Kingsley, herself a mother of one of the children, describes them as representing "years of advanced genetic research." The children reach physical and psychological maturity by twelve years of age, possess telepathic and telekinetic powers, genius-level cognitive abilities, and an "aggressive immunity." This active immune system, like Beatrice's, does not "wait for a disease to attack the body. It

would seek out an airborne virus and destroy it." And this is exactly what happens, except that the virus is not the only life destroyed.

Just as the Darwin researchers want to protect their children against bodily harm, Rappaccini creates the garden and its deadly occupants solely to protect and to enhance his daughter's welfare. He has not tried to gain fame or even recognition for his experiments. He has not used the deadly properties of the various plants to destroy anyone. Even his rival, Professor Baglioni, admits that "the Signor Doctor does less mischief than might be expected" (100). Rappaccini includes Giovanni in his experiment solely to provide an eligible husband for Beatrice (127). Similarly, the Darwin researchers are also concerned parents who want to give their children the best possible life. To achieve that end, the researchers have spent years genetically engineering children who are biologically superior. Their love for their children becomes as obsessive as Rappaccini's love for Beatrice. Kingsley's "immediate concern" is for the children, which is understandable and admirable, but she hostilely denies any possibility that the children could be the cause of anyone's death: "Our research here is limited to human genetics. I can assure you that we're not dealing with something that got away from us." However, the crew of the U.S.S. Lantree, the supply ship that had just stopped at the Darwin Research Station, died from accelerated aging, a unnatural time sequence of a natural, largely genetic process. Kingsley's willful blindness to the possible consequences of the children's enhanced immunity may not be as evil as Rappaccini's blithe death sentence to most of humanity, but it is equally lethal.

Rappaccini is comparable not only to Kingsley, but also to Dr. Polanski, the chief medical officer of the Enterprise. Rappaccini is described as "singularly marked with intellect and cultivation" but incapable of expressing "much warmth of heart" (95). These characteristics could

be those of a warped, cold, and heartless man or those of a sick old man who has never learned how to demonstrate much emotion. The inability to express an emotion does not necessarily mean that one is incapable of feeling an emotion; in other words, controlling one's emotions is not the same as lacking emotions or even possessing a cold, calculating nature, as anyone familiar with Star Trek's Vulcans knows. Rappaccini is dedicated to his work; in the same way that Giovanni praises Rappaccini's being "'capable of so spiritual a love of science'" (100), a fellow crew member describes Pulaski as a most "dedicated physician" having "a passion for her work." The choice of the words "spiritual" and "passion" is quite deliberate. The passion that some scientists have for the pursuit of knowledge may have spiritual qualities, something that Carl Sagan also proposes (29). A love of knowledge, of truth, is a virtue, even if an individual abuses this virtue.

Abuse may occur through love, love of one's children or love of knowledge. Rappaccini's love for his daughter becomes an obsession. It is natural for a father to want his daughter to possess health and to live a long, productive, and happy life; it is not natural for a father to wish to destroy all of humanity to ensure such a future. Likewise, the Darwin researchers' fear for their children's safety overrides all other concerns. Kingsley repeatedly begs to send the children to the Enterprise even though she knows that another ship's crew died after being exposed to the children: "The children are harmless. Every test on them has been negative. I demand that you do something to save them." Kingley's obsessive love for the children combined with her belief in science and technology produce bias, a bias that has deadly potential.

Rappaccini's professional rival, Baglioni, also possesses a blind belief in his science, the traditional medical dogma; thus, Baglioni's statements and judgments are therefore suspect. In

Baglioni's mind, Rappaccini is wrong and potentially evil: "there was a professional warfare of long continuance between him and Doctor Rappaccini, in which the latter was generally thought to have gained the advantage" (100). Baglioni is unable to judge critically Rappaccini's success as a doctor because his theories are so diametrically opposed to the prevailing medical paradigm. Similarly, Pulaski's belief in medical progress is a bias that temporarily destroys her objectivity and almost costs her life. Early in the episode Captain Picard questions if her passion for medicine, her ruling desire to cure her patients, could cause her to be less objective: "Is it possible that such consuming dedication could interfere with her judgment?" He is correct. For like Baglioni, Pulaski, who is an equally well-respected, published, professional, and dedicated researcher, has an unwavering belief that modern medical science can cure anything, that progress is always positive. She finds no evidence that the children are causing the disease, and because her instruments have found nothing, then there must be nothing. Her medical science is infallible: "I know I'm right" she emphatically asserts, believing that the risk from the children "is minimal." But she is wrong, just as Baglioni is wrong when he tells Giovanni that he can reverse the results of Rappaccini's experiment upon Beatrice. His error costs Beatrice her life; Pulaski's almost costs her her own life.

Ultimately, Beatrice chooses to commit suicide by drinking the medicine Giovanni thought would cure her rather than risk harming any human being. Beatrice, more so than Giovanni, is the character who is able to judge the experiment's morality. Beatrice perceives her father's dream, not as a blessing or an improvement, but as "a miserable doom," an excellent description of the future lives of the children of Darwin Research Station. The aggressive nature of their immune systems prohibits their contact with any other humans, not even their parents. They are, in

Pulaski's sentence, "condemned to live out their lives in isolation." They are confined to a living death.

Knowledge is not wisdom, Hawthorne is saying and the Star Trek episode dramatizes. Beatrice does not die because she trusted in medical science or because she chose the wrong treatments. Her death is the result of human flaws on the part of very human, and, therefore, very fallible doctors. The 26 crew members of the supply ship that visited the Darwin Research Station die because human doctors altering the fundamental nature of human beings discover too late that such success is not as desirable as they thought. "An attempt to control human evolution has resulted in a new species that is lethal to its predecessors" is Pulaski's description of the Darwin experiment, but it is also a description of Rappaccini's experiment. Because doctors and medical researchers are human, they will always "fail at playing God" (Schneider and Hopkins). They fail regardless of the goodness or evilness of their intentions. A desire for perfect health is not inherently evil. As Michelangelo once said: "Whoever strives after perfection is striving for something divine." However, as Pulaski notes at the conclusion of "Unnatural Selection," "all achievement has its price." And once the genie has been released, it will not be returned to the bottle: once a scientific discovery has been made, it will be utilized--for good or for evil. For advances in human genetics, Beatrice and the crew of the Lantree pay the ultimate price--death. "Unnatural Selection" is a modern or rather a futuristic retelling of Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter," sharing his moral vision but using visual signifiers and scientific imagery and a mythos that enhance a student's understanding and appreciation of a mainstream story.

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1.

Rappaccini, a famous doctor in Renaissance Padua, has a noble goal: to ensure that his daughter, Beatrice, will never be touched by this world's evil. To achieve this goal, Rappaccini creates his own Eden, a botanical laboratory where he immunizes Beatrice and the young man he has chosen to be her consort, Giovanni, against the evil corrupting forces of the world. Beatrice and Giovanni would become a new Eve and Adam, the progenitors of a new race of humans, a superior race of humans. Rappaccini proposes to send this couple out into the world to destroy all disease, all corruption.

This plot is foiled by two people, Rappaccini's rival in the medical world, Professor Pietro Baglioni, who tricks Giovanni into giving Beatrice an antidote that supposedly will neutralize her father's magic; and Beatrice herself, who realizes that this potion will be fatal to her and chooses death rather than the life of death chosen for her by her father.